

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Steve Glines

The Old Man

His tired body falls heavily on the stool. The unlit stub of a cigarette hangs limply from his lips while his eyes stare distantly into a small mirror hinged on a makeup box. An aspirin swallowed with half a shot of fortification to ease the pain of arthritic bones.

He studies the forced smile reflected in the mirror, moving his head back and forth. Outlines in greasepaint aging smile-cracks on reflected image, titanium white, ruby red and lampblack. "Curtain call, 5 minutes." He takes a deep breath, stands up, stretches, shaking pain from his joints and memory.

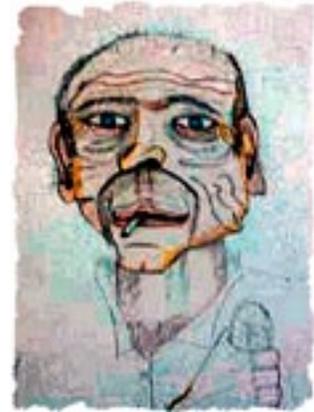
At the edge of the curtain he takes his place with the others; to bury, for a time, ego and age. It's Show Time! A thespians pride in performance, a flawless ballet performed for the ten thousandth time. No adjustment necessary, none needed. Applause! He glows. Fulfilled for a brief moment, he retires from the stage after 3, no 4 curtain calls.

Tired, his body falls limply on the stool in front of the small mirror. He stares into the distance and smiles, recalling the applause, the bows and the hurried "good job" from the ring master as he swiftly moved the troupe off stage. He smiles and re-lights the stub of a cigarette. Two heavy puffs, deeply inhaled.

Old tattered terry cloth wipes the night from a skin deeply pored and cracked from a lifetime of greasepaint and sweat. Lukewarm water and rose scented soap, a gift from a Carney girl, clean all but the deepest pores leaving the suggestion of a mask of permanent happiness. Some fortification for the night to come.

Alone now, a small tear runs swiftly down a cheek rejected by traces of a thespians mask. The age of regrets. He shakes it off, closes the mirrored box and walks into the night. Tents to take down, lions, tigers and bears to feed and elephants too and 150 miles to drive before sleep in a shanty hand built built with pride on the back of an old pickup truck, home for now.

He pauses before sleep to gaze upon the breath of another sleeping town. Smoke curls from chimneys. Here will be the life he always dreamed of, here will be happiness, here will be one last performance before the mirrored box closes for good. It will be a great performance tomorrow but tonight it's cold. Some fortification for the night to come.



drawing by Kitty Glines